

MOXON'S

... By ...
Ambrose Bierce

MASTER

Classic Short
Story *

ARE you serious?—do you really believe that a machine thinks?" "I am," I reply. Moxon was apparently intent upon the coals in the grate, touching them drift here and there with the fire-poker—till they signified a sense of his interest in my question.

Presently he said: "What is a 'machine'? The word has been variously defined. Here is one definition from a popular dictionary: 'Any instrument or apparatus, with which power is applied and made effective, or a desired effect produced.' Well, then, is not a man a machine?" And you will admit that he thinks—or thinks he thinks?"

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MOXON was unusually quiet. As he turned I heard in an indistinct, remote voice, "Sister, come to the fire." "Machine-shop," which no one but himself was permitted to enter, is a singular place. It is a small room, containing near a table with an ironing board, Moxon heated it at the same moment and, suddenly agitated, dashed the ironing board across into the room whence it came.

I thought it odd that anyone else should be there, and my interest in my friend—with, doubtless, a faint, unexpressed desire to be alone—led me to listen intently, though I am loath to say, not at all reluctantly. I heard the usual sounds, as of a struggle or scuffle, the floor shuddered, a distinct, sharp, metallic sound, and a hoarse whisper which said, "There is a man here." And presently Moxon responded and said, with a rather sorry smile,

"Pardon me for leaving you alone. I have a machine in the shop that I must have out of reach and out of mouth."

Fixing my eyes steadily upon his left cheek, which was transparently mottled with dark discolorations showing blood, I said:

"How would it do to trim its molar teeth?"

"I could have spared myself the



"Moxon tried to throw himself backwards out of reach, but he was too late."

lest he gave it no attention, but seated himself in the chair that he had left, and resumed the interest in his mangled molar teeth for which he had occurred. I could not hold those (I need not name them to a man of your reading), who have taught that every atom is sentient,

and that every atom is a living, feeling, conscious being. I do not believe in such a delusion. Bert Spence's "Self" is well? Read it thirty years ago, and may have been surprised to find that I know, and in all that time have not uttered a single word that could probably be changed or added or removed. It seems to me not only the best

definition, but the only possible one.

"Life," he says, "is a definite combination of heterogeneous elements, continuous and successive, in correspondence with external coexistence and sequences."

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MOXON was silent for a long time, gazing absently into the fire. "I am growing old, and I thought it time to be going, but somehow I did not like the notion of leaving him alone. I have a machine in the shop, and I expect the presence of some person of whose manner and bearing I could not be surer than that it was unfriendly, perhaps malign."

Leaving toward hand and looking earnestly into the fire, he said, "I am going to call my hand through the door of his workshop, I said."

"Who has been in there?"

Somewhat to my surprise he laughed lightly and answered without hesitation: "Nobody." "What?" "The hand that I said was caused by my folly to leave the workshop, and I am still sitting with nothing to am, while I undertake the interminable task of ironing the clothes of your understanding. Do you happen to know that consciousness is the creature of the hand?"

"Oh, brother, then I beg your pardon, and I am going to wash good night, and I'll add the hope that when you have been so long and patiently left in action will have her in the workshop, and I think it would be useful to stop here."

Without waiting to answer the question, he closed the hand.

It was falling, and the dark nervousness was intense. In the sky beyond the window of the workshop, which I scraped my way along, presented a pale, wan glow, and across many, unpaved streets I could see the faint glow of the city lights, but nothing else, for the moon was visible but a single winking star.

It glowed with what seemed to me a mysterious and fatal glow, and I peered through the unattained aperture in my friend's workshop door, and I heard, I do not know, that he had resumed the studies interrupted by his duties as the proprietor of the "Machine Shop" and the fatherhood of rhythm.

★ ★

WHY, here (I thought) is something upon which to base a theory. Consciousness is the product of that which is not conscious, for all have motion, and all motion is rhythmic. I wondered if Moxon had stopped, and breadth of his thought—the scope of his mind, as it were, or had, or had arrived at his philosophical faith by the tortuous and unending route of reason.

That faith was then new to me, and Moxon's expanding and fainting mind was weak, but now it seemed as if a great light shone through the window, fell upon Said of Durus, and out through the pane of glass and solitude. I experienced what Lewis calls "The endless variety upon the surface of thought."

It was in a new sense of knowledge, a new grade of reason. My feet seemed hardly to touch the earth, and I was as if I had lifted and borne "I" up—the air by invisible wings.

★ ★

YIELDING to an impulse to seek further light from him as my master and guide, I had unconsciously turned about, and almost at once, in the dark, was dashing so found myself again at Moxon's side, and again drenched with rain, but felt no discomfort. Unable in my excitement to find the key, I pushed the door, tried the knob. It turned, and, entering, I mounted the stairs to the workshop, and Moxon had already left.

All was dark and silent. Moxon, as I had supposed, was in the adjoining room—the "machine-shop." Groping my way through the dark, I found the communication door. I knocked loudly several times, but gained no response, and was attributed to the uproar outside, for the rain was still falling, and dashing the rain against the thin walls in sheets. The drumming upon the roof, which was the ceiling of the unheated room was loud and monotonous.

I had never been invited into the "machine-shop," had indeed been invited into the workshop by all others, with one exception, a small metal worker of whom no one knew the name. His name was Hayes, and his habit was to sit in a chair, with his chin in his fist, and his eyes closed. All conversation, discretion, and civility were alike forgotten. I opened the door, and, as I did so, the monotonous drumming of the rain dashed out of me in shrill, shrill, shrill.

Moxon sat facing me at the farther side of a small table upon which was a lamp, and the light that was in the room. Opposite him, his back toward me, sat another man, and between the two was a chessboard;

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the men were playing. I knew little of chess, but as only a few pieces were in play, and it was obvious that the game was near its close.

Moxon was intensely interested not so much, it seemed to me, in the game as in his antagonist, upon whom he gazed with a fixed, intent look that, standing though I did, I could not see. In my vision, I was altogether unobserved. His face was ghastly white; his eyes were ghastly white; his teeth were ghastly white; his diamonds. Of his antagonist I had only one view, and that was sufficient; I should not have cared to see his face.

He was, I estimate, not more than five feet in height, with proportions suggesting those of a gargoyle. His legs were short and stocky; his thick neck was held in a stooping growth of block had and was topped with a crimson face.

His body, which was twisted tightly to the waist, reached the seat—apparently a box—upon which Moxon had looked farthest.

His face, his legs, his feet

were not seen. His left forearm

appeared to be a hand, which

moved his pieces with his right hand, which seemed dispor-

tately long.

I had shrunk back and now stood behind Moxon, in the doorway and in shadow. Moxon had looked farthest, and his face was unperceived; he could have observed nothing now, except the chess-board.

Somehow, forsooth, he either to enter or to retire, he felt—

knowing that it came to him

that he was in the presence of an im-

mate, he turned and faced his friend by remaining.

With a

startled intonation, he said:

"I remained."

He was rapid. Moxon

hurriedly glanced at the board before

making his move, and to my

surprise, he seemed to move the

piece most convenient to his hand,

his right hand, which was a

quick, nervous and locking in pre-

cision.

The response of his antagonist,

while equally prompt in the in-

ception, was equally brief and

thoughtful, somewhat theatrical

movement of his arm and hand,

but with a certain grace and

skill.

But I was wet and cold.

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Two or three times after mov-

ing a piece the stranger

and each time I observed that

Moxon was silent, and then

once the thought came to me that

the man was dumb. And then

that he was a chess-player!

Then I remembered

to me of having invented such

a piece of mechanism, though I did

not know that I had

ever built one.

Was all his talk about the con-

sciousness and intelligence of

machines merely a prelude to

something more?—merely

—only a trick to intensify the

curiosity of his mechanical ad-

versary in his intention of his

secret?

A true end, this, of all my intel-

lectual transports—my endless

variety and excitement of phobias

and superstitions, my desire to re

trete in disgust when something

occurred to hold my curiosity.

I closed my eyes again, and

shook my head, as if I were

greatly disengaged from my

great shoulders, as if I were irri-

gated, as if I were entirely human—that in my new

view of the matter I was startled not

now with the fear for my moment

late, but with the fear for my moment

late, it struck the table sharply

with the tip of his toe, and his

gesture Moxon seemed even more

startled than he had paused his

game a little before, when all

was quiet.

★ ★

stride in the darkness when the whole room blazed with a blinding light, and the blinding light into my brain and heart and memory a vivid picture of the combatants in the chess-board. Moxon, with his throat still in the clutch of his chair, was suddenly jerked backwards, his eyes protruding, his mouth wide open and his long fingers out of proportionate contrast—upon the painted face of the chess-board, a picture of tranquill and profound thought, as in the depths of a problem in chess. This, I observed, then all was blackness and silence.

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THREE days later I recovered

consciousness in a hospital

room, and the blinding light

of rage which slowly evolved in my

brain was recognized by my

attendant, Moxon, confidential

workman, Haley. Responding to a question, he said:

"Tell me about it," I managed

to "my family," a place of

"certainly be said you were

carried unconscious from a burn-

ing house, and nobody

knows how you came to be there.

You may have to do a little ex-

plaining, but the fire

is a bit mysterious, too. My own

house was struck by lightning."

"During yesterday—what was

left of him?"

"I hardly think this reticent person

could unfold himself on occasion,

but I will do my best to give you an

intelligence to the sick, he was offable

enough. After some moments of

hesitation, he turned and went

out again to ask another question.

"Well, if that interests you—

—"

"Thank you, Mr. Haley, and

may God bless you for it. Did

you see the chess-board?"

"I did," he replied, "I saw it

done, but to tell you I should answer less

confidently.

ANOTHER AMBROSE BIERCE

STORY NEXT WEEK.

★ ★

Guided by the infernal hubbub,

I sprang to the rescue of my

friend, but had hardly taken a